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State of the Field: Material Culture

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Abstract
This article surveys the state of the field of material culture within the discipline of history. The study of material culture – the myriad layers of cultural meaning embedded within objects – has been adopted by historians from colleagues in anthropology, archaeology and museum studies, and continues to thrive as an interdisciplinary field in tandem with art history and literary studies. As inventive digital and embodied methodologies within material culture begin to shape the future of the field, this article takes the opportunity to reflect upon the opportunities and impediments presented to scholars of material culture. It elucidates the diverse and often unfamiliar vernaculars of material objects, and reflects upon future directions in the study of material culture.

Historians of material culture routinely begin introductory classes on the subject with a very similar set of activities. Often, they will ask students to draw their attention to an object they have with them (a pen, an item of clothing, the chair they are sitting on) and ask them to reflect upon it. What does it mean to them? How and by whom was it made? Where and why did they acquire it? Is it comfortable and does it promote particular emotional or sensory reactions? The responses to these exercises reveal powerful stories, centred on topics including prevalent consumer cultures, emotional investment and invisible labour. This task illustrates the pervasive ubiquity of material culture in human life, irrespective of, and yet shaped by, time, place and culture. Objects are omnipresent, and act as a uniquely sympathetic point of connection between humans, past and present. As Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair have stated, 'as long as humans have made material things, material things have shaped human history'.[1] The time-defying nature of objects, the fact that you can touch silk once worn by Henry VIII or hold and feel the weight of the shackles that once bound an enslaved person, is part of their immense power as historical beacons.[2] However, the mystic and elusive

[1] Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair, 'Introduction', in Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair (eds), *History Through Material Culture* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 1–14, at p. 1.
[2] Jules David Prown writes about the ways in which material culture allows the past to be directly re-experienced through our senses in 'The truth of material culture: history or fiction?', in Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (eds), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, DC, 1993), pp. 1–19.

veneer of this connection through time has also presented an obstacle to the legitimisation of material culture as a methodology by history as a discipline.

Material culture has emerged as a sometimes-slippery term within historical studies, which is often applied to anything involving objects. Crucially, material culture centres on objects and their meanings, and it encompasses a body of source material made up of the objects and spaces through which people have constructed and defined their cultural practices and identities. The material properties of those objects, as well as their use, consumption, production and exchange, are all incorporated within this term. As this article will explore, however, there is no unified material culture methodology. Instead, the variety of approaches that historians have taken, whether close readings of individual or groups of objects, broad studies of trade and the flow of goods, or more theoretical approaches to things, can be usefully encompassed by the umbrella of material culture studies. This article therefore uses the term 'material culture' to refer to both the broad academic field of study and the objects themselves. In order to trace the scope, emergence, and possibilities of material culture, this article first charts material culture's adoption as a source base for historical study, before proceeding to reflect upon four particularly fruitful areas of study and how they might shape the future of the field.

It is often the case that work in the field of material culture commences with defensive refrains, which champion the validity of the field.[3] Yet the 'material turn', which began in earnest in the 1970s, is now over half a century old.[4] Many other young fields, such as digital history, do not feel the need to justify their work in a similar fashion; however, material culture scholars often find themselves compelled to validate and defend their work.[5] The discipline of history has long deified the power of words and dismissed objects as opaque and trivial. The magic of objects may disobey the laws of time to draw us into such intimate contact with the past, but it can also cause objects to appear mysterious and fickle, especially when we are not conversant in their own unique languages. Words and objects require different but complementary literacies to reveal their meanings, but one is no more reliable than the other.[6] Objects are 'mute to those who listen only for pronouncements from the past', yet without giving due attention to the messages within objects, 'history is impoverished'.[7] Issues of interpretation, inaccuracy

[3] See, for example, Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, 'Introduction', in Steven and Kingery (eds), *History from Things*, pp. viii–xvii.

[4] See, for example, James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York, 1977).

[5] See, for example, the recent state of the field article on digital history in this publication. C. Annemieke Romein et al., 'State of the Field: Digital History', *History*, 105/365 (2020), pp. 291–312.

[6] On material literacy, see Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith (eds), *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Nation of Makers* (London, 2020).

[7] Lubar and Kingery, 'Introduction', p. viii; Karen Harvey, 'Introduction: Practical Matters', in Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture* (Abingdon, 2009), pp. 1–23, at p. 1.

and partial retention abound, whatever the source; it is the modes of listening and interpretation which must be adjusted. Objects have 'their own grammar and vocabulary', with which material culture scholars must become familiar. Yet material languages are as complex and diverse as those spoken and written. To comprehend the carving of a chair does not equate to an understanding of the fibres and stitches of a garment.[8] These diverse material vernaculars, coupled with widespread lack of material literacy among historians, are at least in part to blame for this disciplinary rift.

There is no universally agreed material culture methodology, nor any single way to go about learning how to read objects.[9] From its origins as an academic field, material culture initially defined and later bridged disciplinary divides. The roots of the field can be found in the anthropological and archaeological approaches of the later twentieth century.[10] A gulf between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects characterised the hierarchical viewpoint imposed by historians and art historians onto the disciplinary division of 'appropriate' sources. Art historians focused on paintings, prints and works on paper and historians centred their studies upon the written word, while objects were '"dismissed" to the realms of archaeology and curatorship'.[11] It is within those fundamentally materially attentive fields (archaeology, anthropology and museum studies) that the hard graft and groundwork of material culture theory was developed. Work by Henry Glassie, Igor Kopytoff, James Deetz and Daniel Miller, among numerous other anthropologists and archaeologists, helped delineate differing approaches to material culture, before historians had begun to consider its power.[12] As a discipline, history has borrowed, adapted and built upon the theories developed by colleagues in these fields, as has art history.

As historians have developed their own ways of thinking and writing about objects, historically grounded critical and analytical approaches to objects emerged. This has countered a tendency to present objects as illustrative texture to contextualise work still focused on words and texts. 'Material culture', 'artefact' and 'thing' have assumed specific and nuanced meanings and should be applied with thought and theoretical

[8] Ann Smart Martin, 'Shaping the field: the multidisciplinary perspectives of material culture', in Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (eds), *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (Knoxville, 1997), pp. 1–20, at p. 3.

[9] Prown's methodology of description, deduction and speculation continues to be influential. See Jules David Prown, 'Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture theory and method', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17/1 (1982), pp. 1–19.

[10] For a detailed history of material culture's anthropological roots, see Dan Hicks, 'The material-cultural turn: event and effect', in Dan Hicks and Mary Carolyn Beaudry (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 25–98.

[11] Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, 'Introduction: writing material culture history', in Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Writing Material Culture History* (London, 2015), p. 3.

[12] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, 1999); Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 64–92; Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*; Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge, 2010).

awareness.[13] Material culture centres on accessing and assessing the myriad layers of cultural meaning embedded within objects. When approached as material culture, objects are more than witnesses to history, they are autonomous agents in the creation of that history. 'Artefact' has taken on a still more nuanced meaning, retaining a connection to its antiquarian and archaeological connotations as an object made by past civilisations, while also denoting a (sometimes disputed and disrupted) sense of authenticity and authority.[14] When these objects stop functioning as intended, they are transformed into 'things' as their relationship to the humans around them transmutes from one of use to 'thingness'.[15] This vocabulary of material culture is meaningful and precise, and, like engagement with objects, should be deployed deliberately and thoughtfully.

Historical engagement with material culture emerged to solve problems within existing historical paradigms, rather than because the worth of objects was itself independently recognised. From the 1960s, some historians began to look beyond the walls of palaces and great houses and the extensively recorded lives of their inhabitants.[16] Instead of kings and queens, prime ministers and the celebrated few, the lives of 'common' people began to spark interest. Their plight, however, was less readily present in traditional archival documents. Bereft of written accounts of these lives, practitioners of 'history from below' turned to the remnants of material lives. The study of consumption patterns offered a materially conscious avenue for these historians, who often found the traces of plebeian lives in inventories and accounts rather than museum stores.[17] The resulting acknowledgement of objects as mobile parts of a widespread, global network of trade and exchange placed material culture at the centre of the burgeoning field of global history in the 2000s.[18] Itinerant and liminal, objects passed within and between people as 'manifestations of culture'.[19] This reframing of objects as vibrant agents within historical narratives has spawned a plethora of intersecting and lively approaches, which have challenged the primacy of the written word, and forced historians to collaborate with and learn from anthropologists, archaeologists and curatorial colleagues.

[13] Harvey, 'Introduction', p. 3.
[14] Crystal Lake, *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects* (Baltimore, 2020), pp. 5–6.
[15] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), p. 4.
[16] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963).
[17] Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and John Harold Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Cmmmercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760*, 2nd edn (London, 1996).
[18] Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005); Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (eds), *How India Clothes the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500–1850* (Leiden, 2009); Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013).
[19] Prown, 'The truth of material culture', p. 1.

Since the 2000s, the myriad applications for material culture within historical study have flourished and diversified. The sundry meanings of objects as crucibles for identities, sexualities, aesthetics, ideologies, economies and politics have been celebrated and embraced.[20] Part of the fuel for this enthusiasm has been the continued willingness among material culture scholars to work in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary ways. As the discipline of history welcomes material culture into its methodological scope, it is vital that historians continue to collaborate with and acknowledge the work of their colleagues in Literary Studies and Art History, as well as the disciplines discussed above. Literary, historical and art-historical approaches to material culture overlap and offer valuable opportunities to acknowledge and value the work of colleagues working on comparable inquiries and with, often, the same sources.[21] The strongest, most inventive, and intellectually stimulating work in the field sits along these interdisciplinary boundaries. Four areas of particular innovation which will be discussed further here are: objects as global and temporal connectors, emotional, embodied and sensory histories, materiality and the making of objects, and routes to reconstructing lost material worlds.

The connective power of objects across space and time is integral to their historical and cultural importance. An object encased in a glass museum display is at once disassociated from its time and place of origin, and transcendent of that temporal specificity. It acts as a vital conduit through which cultural values are transmitted and given material immortality. As it travels through time and space, it brings its experiences and interactions with it. It evolves and lives beyond a single moment of creation. That capability of the object as time-traveller, illuminated within the dissociative space of the museum, applies throughout the life of an object, and can be as readily applied to its past as to its present.[22] The object as a point of temporal and geographical connection is central to Zara Anishanslin's study of a portrait of Anne Shippen Willing by Robert Feke.[23] Anishanslin argues that the dress worn by Willing in her portrait 'encapsulated the history of British imperial trade' as she traces the garment from the silk worm's cocoon to the painter's brush.[24] The resultant narrative is that of an object in motion, evolving as it passed

[20] Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin, 'Introduction: material strategies engendered', *Gender & History*, 14/3 (2002), pp. 371–81, at p. 374.

[21] For literary scholars who engage with material culture, see Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire* (London, 2005); Julie Park, *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England* (Stanford, 2010); Chloe Wigston Smith, *Women, Work and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge, 2013).

[22] On the lives and afterlives of objects, see Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986); Ariane Fennetaux, Amélie Junqua and Sophie Vasset (eds), *The Afterlife of Used Things: Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London, 2014). The eighteenth-century it-narrative offers an eighteenth-century conceptualisation of this. See Park, *The Self and It*.

[23] Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (London, 2016).

[24] Ibid., p. 7.

between human hands, crossed continents, and transmuted between mediums. The transient role of objects, specifically when characterised as 'goods', in shaping material worlds is felt throughout literature on global histories.[25]

Studies on specific commodities, such as Giorgio Riello's Cotton and Erika Rappaport's work on tea, have mapped the global cultures and connections shaped by these commodities and the material paraphernalia they produced.[26] Cotton leads us not only to woven textiles and spun threads, but to looms, technological machinery, architecture and furniture. Even the most Eurocentric narratives of cotton's history take us from the cotton fields of Bengal and America, aboard East India Company trading ships, through the looms of industrial weaving towns like Cottonopolis Manchester, into the drapers of European and American towns and cities or the Portuguese and Dutch Chintz warehouses, and onto the bodies and into the homes of Europeans.[27] A single material good offers an entry route into a vast interconnected array of symbiotic object types and spaces of making, consumption and ownership.

These joined-up global material tales also remind us that the field must look beyond Anglo-American, European, heteronormative and resolutely white tales of material culture. Material culture's strength, as yet only partially tapped, is its ability to look beyond the restrictions imposed by the white, patriarchal and class-based systems which have shaped written sources. Material culture often acts as a marker of humanity's distinctions, divisions and diversity. It is part of complex cultures of otherness, appropriation, demarcation and identity formation.[28] Cross-cultural exchange is certainly part of this conversation; for example, work on the Chinese reimagining of European aesthetics, and the creation of 'Chinese' goods for the European market.[29] However, we must also look at how global trade and white, heteronormative, patriarchal dominance

[25] For more on this, see Paula Findlen, 'Early modern things: objects in motion, 1500–1800', in Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (London, 2013), pp. 1–28.
[26] Riello, *Cotton*; Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, 2017).
[27] For more on cotton, see Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1991); Beverly Lemire, 'Fashioning global trade: Indian textiles, gender meanings and European consumers, 1500–1800', in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (eds), *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500–1850* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 365–90.
[28] For the complexities of empire, race, colonialism and material culture, see, for example Chloe Wigston Smith, 'The empire of home: global domestic objects and the female American (1767)', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40/1 (2017), pp. 67–87.
[29] See, for example, David Porter, 'Monstrous beauty: eighteenth-century fashion and the aesthetics of the Chinese taste', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35/3 (2002), pp. 395–41. On broader cross-cultural consumption, see Dana Leibsohn, 'Made in China, made in Mexico', in Donna Pierce and Ronal Otsuka (eds), *At the Crossroads: The Arts of Spanish American and Early Global Trade, 1492–1850* (Oklahoma, 2012), pp. 11–39; Marcy Norton, 'Tasting empire: chocolate and the European internalization of Mesoamerican aesthetics', *American Historical Review*, 111/3 (2006), pp. 660–91. See also Margot C. Finn and Kate Smith (eds), *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857* (London, 2018).

has sometimes whitewashed and erased material cultures.[30] While material culture has exceptional potential to bolster the histories of the historically marginalised, material culture approaches do not automatically open up windows onto histories of the enslaved, of the poor, of queer and LGBTQIA+ communities, and work to decolonise and diversify the field must be proactive.[31] The content of museum collections reflects the biases of historic collecting policies which, as with written sources, have privileged white, cis, heteronormative and elite narratives. While some of the damage done by the narrow collecting policies of the past is broadly irreparable, historians can challenge preconceptions of which objects are worthy of study, as well as realign the perspectives from which objects' stories are told. At the same time, active collections like the Museum of Transology (an ongoing initiative to collect objects relating to trans, non-binary and intersex people's lives) offer a model for inclusionary collecting. While this is not necessarily replicable for the objects of the long dead, such initiatives demonstrate the importance of diversifying our strategies and approaches to collecting.

It is, of course, not only the people behind material cultures who must be diversified, but the approaches and intellectual paradigms through which objects are examined. The emotional power of objects is perhaps innate; it has often been central to historians' formative moments. To gaze at awe-inspiring treasures in a stately home or on a film screen, to cherish a memento from a loved one or which represents a precious memory, or indeed to reflect upon a lack of heirlooms and material deficit: these material experiences are routinely present in historians' origin stories, and centre upon an emotional connection to objects. This ubiquity has led to projects which intersect with the history of emotions, itself a vibrant emerging field.[32] While laughter, sadness and disgust have found a place within the history of emotions as a whole, it is perhaps the history of love and memory which have most closely united with material culture. For historians of emotion, material culture 'may be seen as a way of making emotions tangible'.[33] As Miller has expressed, assemblages of objects could 'store and possess, take in and

[30] Bridget T. Heneghan, *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* (Jackson, MS, 2003).

[31] For work on queer histories through material culture, see Valerie Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (London, 2013); John Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain* (Manchester, 2015); Freya Gowrley, *Domestic Space in Britain, 1750–1840: Materiality, Sociability and Emotion* (London, 2021). For work on the material culture of the poor, see John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2007). For work on race and material culture, see James A. Delle, Stephen A. Mrozowski and Robert Paynter (eds), *Lines That Divide: Historical Archaeologies of Race, Class, and Gender* (Knoxville, 2000); Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia, 2013).

[32] For an introduction to the history of emotions, see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2015); Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester, 2017).

[33] Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles, 'A feeling for things, past and present', in Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 8–23, at p. 14.

breathe out the emotions with which they have been associated'.[34] Projects such as John Styles's work on the Foundling Hospital tokens of the eighteenth century have striven to acknowledge the symbiotic emotional impact of people on objects and of objects on people, even within something as simple as a piece of colourful ribbon.[35] Similarly, Sally Holloway's work on love and courtship has demonstrated that objects were used to 'negotiate, cement, and publicize a match'.[36] To both Styles and Holloway, objects were central to emotionally charged social rituals. Objects could transform the abstract into something tangible. While objects were, undoubtedly, vessels for conveying and memorialising affective experiences and connections, historians must take care not to project emotional meaning that cannot be substantiated. Emotions, like so many other aspects of humanity, must be historicised, contextualised and given nuance; imaginative construction or simplified supposition is dangerous. To assume that a token, for instance, that was left with a child at the Foundling Hospital as part of an institutional convention must habitually represent maternal love, overrides a more complex array of emotional engagement or disengagement that a particular mother may have felt.[37] Human emotions are knotty and labyrinthine, and material culture channels rather than simplifies the complexities of the human psyche.

This circumspect approach must also be taken when navigating the sensory histories of human interactions with objects. To hold an object not only connects us to the emotional echoes of its past, but also to the sensory experiences it evokes. When we are lucky enough to unsheathe our hands from nitrile gloves in the museum store, the sensorial richness of haptic interaction with an object becomes apparent. Victorian velvet does not feel like the velvet found in modern fabric stores and an eighteenth-century teapot has a different weight and tactility from one from Ikea in the twenty-first century. Even the materiality of specific object types, as understood by their names and functions, evolves over time, and objects were handled and manoeuvred differently in the past. As with emotions, we should not imagine that we feel, smell, hear, taste, or even see in the same way as our ancestors.[38] How we, as humans, process our responses to sensory stimuli is moulded by our social and cultural upbringings.[39] Yet the sensory landscapes produced by and through objects, and the sensory strategies developed to navigate the material

[34] Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 38.
[35] John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (London, 2010).
[36] Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2019), p. 14.
[37] This is an issue considered and expertly avoided by Styles in *Threads of Feeling*.
[38] On the senses, see Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago, 2012); Constance Classen and David Howes, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London, 2014).
[39] Classen and Howes, *Ways of Sensing*, p. 2.

world, proffer rich veins for research. Kate Smith, for example, has demonstrated the importance of touch as part of the browsing practices of eighteenth-century consumers.[40] Haptics, along with smell and taste for consumables, were key markers of quality, suitability and desirability in an ever-expanding world of goods.

Any reflection upon how objects are deciphered and comprehended through our senses calls us to consider the materiality of those objects. Artefacts (that is objects constructed by human hands) are themselves assemblages of different materials, processed and manufactured into something new. Literacy in materiality and making was present in rhetoric around material culture both in the pre-industrial age, and as industry and mass manufacture developed.[41] How things were made, what they were made from, and how they were traded: this knowledge permeated society and shaped how people navigated their interactions with objects. Children learnt to differentiate flax from wool through play, and adults continued to engage in a world of making as both producers and consumers of material goods throughout the life cycle.[42] Consumers could visit potteries and manufactories, and the wealthy might even invite industrialists into their homes to explain their inventions.[43] Similar to the performative display of artisanal craft today, making was demonstrated and enacted, even in elite consumption. Mass manufacture and globalised production networks have generated a lacuna between production in distant factories and consumption in shops sanitised of manual labour. It is vital that historians, who are often part of a twenty-first-century culture which is disengaged with the practices of making, do not project this gulf back upon their readings of material interactions in the past.

The materiality of objects has also inevitably impacted their survival. Like the written record, the material remnants of the past are also incomplete and fractured. Preservation and collecting bias in museums, class- and cultural-based systems of retention and disposal, and material disintegration and decomposition have eroded the material record. To plug this gap, historians have turned both to their textual and archival roots, and to diverse and new technologies. Returning to texts does not necessarily mean a methodology confined to inventories and account books.[44] Freya Gowrley's innovative work recovers lost material worlds

[40] Kate Smith, 'Sensing design and workmanship: the haptic skills of shoppers in eighteenth-century London', *Journal of Design History*, 25 (2012): pp. 1–10; see also Serena Dyer, 'Shopping and the senses: retail, browsing and consumption in 18th-century England', *History Compass*, 12/9 (2014), pp. 694–703.

[41] Kate Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands: Perceiving Production in England, 1700–1830* (Manchester, 2014); Dyer and Smith (eds), *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain*.

[42] For more on the producer/consumer paradigm, see Serena Dyer, 'Stitching and shopping: the material literacy of the consumer', in Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith (eds), *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2020), pp. 99–116.

[43] Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (London, 2009), p. 154.

[44] For more recent work using such sources, see Joseph Harley, 'Pauper inventories, social relations and the nature of poor relief under the old poor law, England c.1601–1834', *Historical Journal*, 62/2 (2019), pp. 375–98.

by reading sources such as contemporary letters and diaries as forms of ekphrasis.[45] Through the descriptions wrought by objects' owners, we access an imagined recreation of the object through the veil of its owner's interpretation. Fragmented, broken, lost, geographically distant or precious objects can also be recovered, or more readily accessed, through literal forms of reproduction and replication. Technologies such as digital and three-dimensional printed replicas of objects offer us ways to intimately access and experimentally manipulate the materiality of objects.[46] Similarly, X-rays have been used by curatorial staff to see through the layers of construction and materials in objects, such as stays and corsets.[47] The 'making turn', too, has revealed the importance of physical reconstruction and reapplication of historical techniques, methods and objects in recapturing embodied knowledge, building upon the field of experimental archaeology.[48]

As Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello have reflected, 'history has long been seen as the discipline in which its practitioners engaged in the analysis of textual documents and communicated by producing more texts'.[49] As the historical study of material culture matures, historians have challenged and innovated beyond the text-based restrictions of traditional historical methodology. The translation of material language into academic prose is a skill, but one which continues to be renewed and reinvented as technologies and methodologies diversify.[50] The applications and avenues for material culture are similarly varied, and only a few have been discussed here. Material cultures of scale, life cycles, collecting, the country house, the enslaved, and texts, books and documents as objects are vibrant and ongoing areas of study.

Amidst this flurry of innovation, it can be intimidating for new material culture scholars to know where to begin. Traditional archival documents are often conveniently catalogued and segregated into discrete pockets of information. Objects, however, have rarely been filtered in this way. Museum collecting policies, while a fruitful topic of study in themselves, have not been formulated to assist researchers in the same ways. When first approaching a new project, the engorged roller-racking of museum stores can seem overwhelming, as can the scores of results on an online search. Accumulating the skills not only to read material objects and translate their materiality into academic prose, but also to find, filter and sort

[45] Gowrley, *Domestic Space in Britain, 1750–1840*.
[46] For more, see Haidy Geismar, *Museum Object Lessons for the Digital Age* (London, 2018). My thanks to Melissa Gustin for this reference.
[47] Edwina Ehrman, *Fashioned from Nature* (London, 2018).
[48] Hilary Davidson, 'The embodied turn: making and remaking dress as an academic practice', *Fashion Theory*, 23/3 (2019), pp. 329–62; Sarah A. Bendall, 'The case of the "French Vardinggale": a methodological approach to reconstructing and understanding ephemeral garments', *Fashion Theory*, 23/3 (2019), pp. 363–99; see also Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers and Harold J. Cook, *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge* (New York, 2017).
[49] Gerritsen and Riello, 'Introduction', pp. 1–13, at p. 3.
[50] Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 7.

through those available for study requires patience and an appreciation of curatorial knowledge.[51] Curators are invaluable guides to the objects in their care, and collaborative work is essential to the future of the field.

It is naïve to think that material culture has been fully accepted in all quarters of the discipline of history as an equally valid approach. It is substantially closer to mainstream acceptance than it was twenty years ago, but widespread apprehension of an unknown material language continues to cause rifts. Yet, as material culture scholars have grown in confidence, they have moved away from servile requests for acceptance, and instead produced vital, pioneering and radical work, from which the entire discipline cannot help but feel the reverberations.

[51] Numerous guides exist to introduce students to material culture, including Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture* (London, 2009); Gerritsen and Riello (eds), *Writing Material Culture History*; Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett and Leonie Hannan (eds), *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600* (London, 2016); Hannan and Longair (eds), *History Through Material Culture*. For a specialist guide for dress history, see Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion* (London, 2018).